

STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION OF THE KING VULTURE *SARCOGYPS CALVUS* (SCOPOLI) IN GUJARAT: RESULTS OF A RECENT ENQUIRY¹

SHIVRAJKUMAR KHACHAR² AND TAEJ MUNDKUR³

(With a text-figure)

The present distribution of the King Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* in Gujarat state is mapped on the basis of 50 sightings of the the bird made by 23 birdwatchers and naturalists during 1982 to 1987. The available information indicates that the bird's range has shrunk considerably in recent times and that it must be put on the list of endangered species in Gujarat.

INTRODUCTION

The King Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* (Scopoli) is resident to the entire Indian subcontinent and is found up to an altitude of about 2000 m in the Himalayas. It is sparsely distributed and nowhere very abundant (Ali and Ripley 1983). In Gujarat, the bird was common in the Kutch region (Ali 1944) and the Saurashtra region (Dharmakumar-sinhji 1955), and was seen in small numbers throughout the state (Ali 1954). In the last decade or so the number of sightings seemed to have diminished sharply and nesting was rarely observed. A survey was therefore undertaken to study the present distribution and status of the King Vulture in Gujarat.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In 1982, alarmed by the absence of sightings of the vulture in areas where it was frequently seen in the past, one of us (S.K.) started an enquiry on the status and distribution of this unmistakable bird in Gujarat. A questionnaire soliciting information was sent to known birdwatchers. A short write-up with a picture for identification was published in the local newspapers, Newsletter of the Gujarat State Committee of WWF-India, and Newsletter for Birdwatchers, requesting information. Records of sightings came from

birdwatchers in various parts of the state, and officials of the State Forest Department kept a look out for the bird. The data thus collected were carefully scrutinized and compiled to form the basis of this report.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fig.1 summarizes the sightings of the King Vulture recorded from 1982 to 1987. The sightings have been mainly restricted to the semi-arid to arid regions, namely the Kutch, Jamnagar, Rajkot, Junagadh, Bhavnagar, Surendranagar, and Banaskantha districts of the state. The Gir Forest in the Junagadh district registered the maximum number of sightings. The second stronghold is in Kutch, mainly around the Kaladungar on the south of the Great Rann and along the edges of the Little Rann. The sightings have been typically of one or two birds, except for a single gathering of 6 birds recorded at Amrutvel in the Gir Forest on 31 March 1983. This supports the understanding that the bird is solitary in habit, and is far outnumbered by the other common species of vultures (Ali and Ripley 1983).

In the past, one of us (S.K.) has known the bird to nest near Jasdan (Rajkot district) and in Bhavnagar (Bhavnagar district), and watched its spectacular nuptial display and mating. The bird does not nest there any more. As a matter of fact, there are very few records of its nesting in Gujarat in recent times; one active nest near Zainabad on the eastern border of the Little Rann was recorded on 27 February 1987 (E. Foster, pers. comm.), and two unconfirmed reports of nesting near the village of Baid (Jamnagar district) on 4 December

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²Darbagadh, Jasdan, Gujarat-360 050. (Deceased)

³Department of Biosciences, Saurashtra University, Rajkot-360 005.

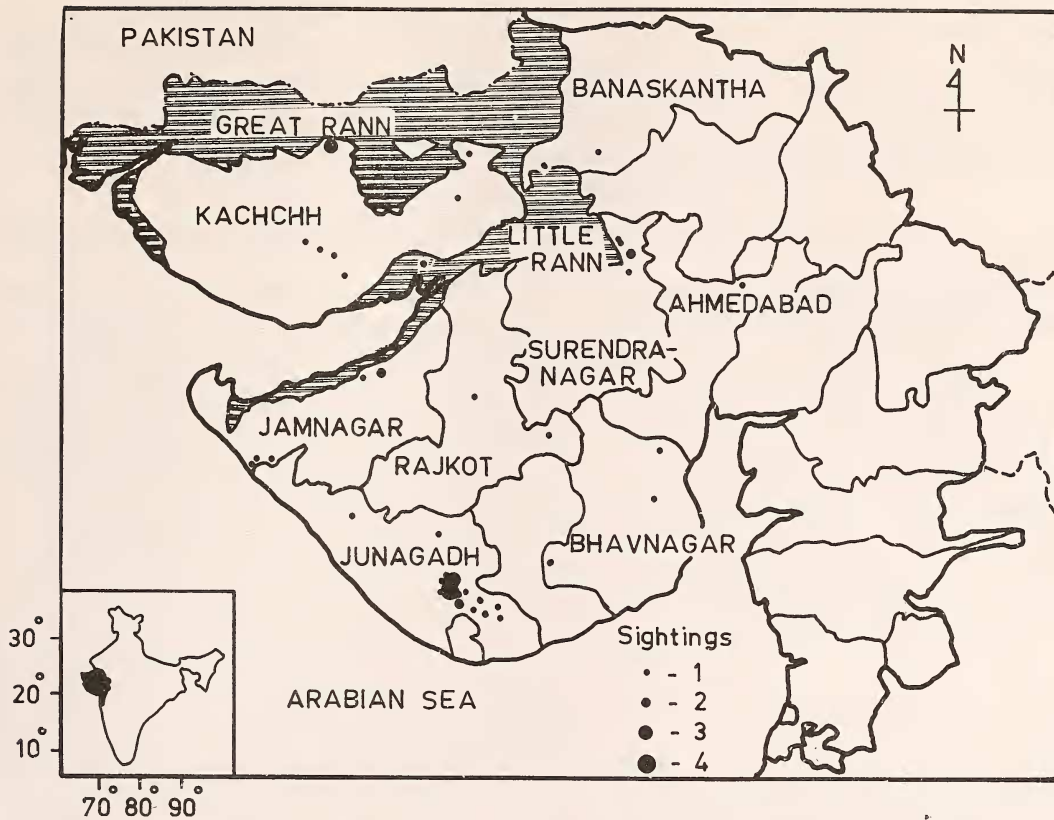


Fig.1. Outline map of Gujarat State. Inset gives outline of India, with Gujarat state darkened. Stipled area shows the Great & Little Rann of Kutch and low lying coastal marshes. The location and number of sightings of the King Vulture is represented by closed circles as explained in the scale.

1985 (N.M. Mashru, pers. comm.). One nest was found in a tree on a cliffside at Mitiala (Bhavnagar district) during 1975—1976 (S.K. Goyal, pers. comm.).

This study does not reveal the size of the vulture population in Gujarat, but it clearly shows that the bird's range has reduced drastically. From the available information it does seem that this vulture is endangered in this state. The scanty records of nesting are of grave concern. The bird is known to nest on trees, often short trees. There has been a continued and rapid increase in the human and domestic livestock populations, and the livestock is often fed with branches of trees, particularly *Acacia*, so that safe nest sites for the vulture have become a scarce commodity. The loss of nesting habitat in this region seems to be

the main cause for a decline in number of large—sized tree nesting avian species in general, which would include most of the raptors, storks, herons and ibises.

It is just possible that the King Vulture may also be using cliff edges on hills for nesting, though such a nesting habit has not been recorded so far. Concentration of birds observed around the Kaladungar, the tallest hill in Kutch, and Girnar hill in Junagadh district, indicates the possibility that at present the bird may be using cliff ledges more often than trees for nesting.

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